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The making of shoes is an age-old profession dedicated to providing a product for early man who needed something to protect his feet.

But even as late as in the 1600s, the shoemaker's kit would consist only of a lap stone, a flat face hammer, awls, waxed ends, knives, rub sticks, a piece of shark skin for buffing the leather, and a bottle of blacking.

In the early 1800s, shoemaking machines were invented. The introduction of shoe trade machinery made it possible for the shoemaker to make left and right shoes. (Up to this point, shoes were interchangeable and uncomfortable wear.)

A rolling machine had also been invented replacing the lap stone and hammer used to pound or toughen leather, followed by the invention of the sewing machine and tools to split hides for uniform thickness and for cutting out shoe parts.

By late 1850s, machines were available to sew soles to the shoes. By the time a certain Czechoslovakian family of cobblers founded in the late 1890s — what was to become world-wide shoemaking industry decades later — a number of shoemaking machinery were already employed in the business.

When Thomas Bata, son of the original founder of the shoemaking family business in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, re-founded the family's business in 1939 at a plant in a community, later called Batawa, his business came well equipped with the then latest machinery necessary to mass produce shoes of various styles and sizes. By 1955, the Batawa plant was one among the family's worldwide business of 56 factories in 46 countries together producing 80 million pairs of shoes annually.

By the time Tom Towns of Frankford came to work at the Batawa plant in 1972, about 2,000 people were already working at the site.

"I remember then all the five floors of the building were buzzing with machinery. I was first hired as a labourer and was involved in all aspects of making shoes. We had tools for every part of the shoemaking process. For example, we used lasting pliers with hammers on them in case you had bumps and you can correct them right then and there," he recalled.

The company's products were an array of leather shoes, rubber shoes, moccasins and countless others that were sold in 250 retail

outlets in Canada.

"We made joggers, heavy winter rubber shoes, light rain protecting rubber shoes, summer shoes, men and women's dress shoes, cross country ski shoes. Anything to do with shoes we made them," he chuckled.

Today, each pair of shoes made by the company could cost anywhere upwards of \$100, he said. Compare this to the cost of shoes during the war years when the company's children shoes were priced between \$1.99 to \$4.99. Ladies' shoes were

sold between \$4.99 to \$9.99 which was less than the men's shoes at the price range between \$8.99 to \$14.99.

Like many employed at the plant, Towns had no background in shoemaking industry.

"It was hands-on experience. We were trained as we went along." Employees were encouraged to undergo company-sponsored courses which, Towns thinks, were very specific to the needs of the plant.

"You see, the shoe making process got to start right from the cutting section. As it comes through the production line to the final stage where it's packaged they have to be perfect all the way," he said.

Towns certainly knows what he was talking about as in later years it became his job to inspect the products before they were packaged.

"By the end of the day, I would have inspected anywhere between a 1,000 or 1,400 pairs of shoes. This was everyday for five days a week," he added.

Such was the working world familiar to many families in the area for 60 years since the first day of the company's operation when sirens called the company employees to work or released them from duty. The company built houses, churches and schools in the Batawa community and had created a close-knit family of friends and co-workers over the years. The announcement of the company closing its Batawa plant came in October, 1999, shattering the hearts of many who had devoted their entire professional lives inside the plant's five-storey building.

Towns, now 51, found himself one of 25 employees retained to stay on at the company's warehouse still in operation at the former shoe-manufacturing site.

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